



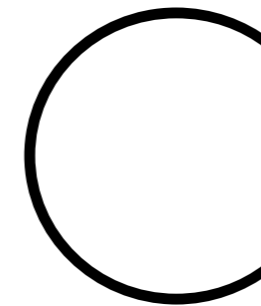
THE NEW RIVIERA

*The latest Aman opening, Amanzo'e, presages
new life for the prelapsarian Peloponnese*

By Rachel Howard Photography by Martin Kreuzer



Above: the secluded beach club at Amanzo'e situated 6km away, left; Zogeria Bay on the beautifully preserved island of Spetses, right



ruising around Porto Heli, with superyachts anchored just offshore and their innumerable tenders whizzing back and forth across the azure coastal waters, it's hard to believe Greece is in its sixth year of recession. But then again, glamour isn't new to this upscale pocket of the rural Peloponnese: it arrived in the 1960s, when shipping tycoons snapped up prime coastal plots and private islands, camouflaging their sprawling, low-slung houses among olive and pine groves.

Today, a new swell of development is making waves in this idyllic Greek paradise, in the form of a €200m investment by Dolphin Capital Investors (DCI), a venture capital group that has bought vast swaths of land in the region (and many other choice locations around the country). The group's ambitious ten-year plan, dubbed the Porto Heli Collection, includes a Nikki Beach hotel slated to open in 2014 alongside another, yet to be announced, property and an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course for an area which until very recently was a bastion of old money.

For now, the main attraction is the Amanzo'e, the first villa-integrated Aman resort in Europe. On a remote hilltop with commanding views of the archipelago, Amanzo'e was designed by Ed Tuttle, an Aman veteran and philhellene who owns a house on the nearby island of Hydra. Tuttle's design pays homage to Ancient Greece: the elevated main building, fortified by stone walls and punctuated by colonnades, echoes the Acropolis. There's even a miniature amphitheatre modelled on ancient Epidaurus, a must-see just 50 kilometres away. Reflective pools direct the gaze towards a horizon of misty mountains hovering above the shimmering sea, a stage set for spectacular sunsets.

Clustered around this contemporary temple are 38 freestanding pavilions, each with its own pool spilling into the landscape. Despite an abundance of marble, the pavilions are coolly relaxed, with muted interiors that pull off a tricky balancing act between dramatic and intimate. In every room, sliding doors open up to let the outside in. The grounds are scattered with ancient olive trees and roofs are planted with fragrant lavender, thyme and rosemary, enhancing the sense of being at one with the natural surroundings.

SECLUDED PARADISE

Like the local shipowners who rarely venture from their walled estates, other residents are elusive. Even at full occupancy, the resort feels completely private. The two lap pools at the chic Beach Club – six kilometres down a bumpy country road to a sheltered bay – are so immaculately designed that nobody dares to plunge in. Everyone, including the fresh-faced, friendly staff, seems to glide about in slow motion. A reverent hush hangs over the vast, understated spa and alfresco bar – even at cocktail o'clock. The resident babies never seem to cry. Only the insistent cicadas disrupt the peace, along with the occasional whir of a helicopter overhead. It's a 20-minute ride from Athens airport with the conveyance, extended to between two and three hours by car or ferry.

"Nothing like this existed in Greece before," says DCI co-founder Miltos Kambourides. "Many of our guests had never come to Greece because there was no hotel up to their standard." It's a brash statement – but it's true. Thanks to an outdated rating system, there are plenty of five-star hotels in Greece, but very few really offer five-star services ▶

Facing page: Amanzo'e's Wally One speedboat, ideal for island-hopping, top; the resort's yoga pavilion nestling in its verdant, surrounds, bottom

ISLAND HOPPING

The Amanzo's two head-turning boats whisk guests to castaway coves and pretty coastal towns such as neoclassical Nafplion and medieval Monemvasia. Alternatively, guests can zip around the car-free islands of Spetses and Hydra in a day – though both merit longer stays. Spetses, a weekend retreat for Athenians, was a driving force in the Greek Revolution of 1821. Remarkably, its naval fleet was commanded by a woman, the formidable Laskarina Bouboulina, whose home is now an evocative museum (bouboulinamuseum-spetses.gr), where the mosaic courtyard is a magical setting for concerts during July and August. Much of Spetses is protected forest, a legacy of visionary conservationist Sotirios Anargiros, who also built the glorious **Poseidonion Grand Hotel** (poseidonion.com, top) in 1914. The top-notch modern Greek and Japanese restaurants are prime spots for people-watching over aloe, shiso and cucumber cocktails. After dark, the action centres around the old harbour, Palio Limani, where shipbuilders still practice their craft by day and **Bikini Bar** (bottom) is the place to see and be seen. In contrast to pine-clad Spetses, craggy Hydra (centre) has banned even mopeds. Donkeys lug Louis Vuitton trunks up steep whitewashed alleys, and water taxis service remote beaches such as Bisti and Limnioniza. Bohemian Hydra has a flourishing art scene: young guns show at Hydra School Projects, housed in the crumbling high school, while big hitters like Matthew Barney and Maurizio Cattelan create site-specific pieces in the former Slaughterhouse (deste.gr). Brice Marden and Juergen Teller, who both own houses on Hydra, hold court at the classic **Pirate Bar** (piratebar.gr).



“Porto Heli is simply beautiful. It has the elegance of the French and Italian Riviera 50 years ago. Natural beauty, untouched surroundings and very friendly people”

and amenities. Kambourides spotted this gap in the market and realised that he needed to partner with a world-class hospitality brand. Adrian Zecha, Aman's spry octogenarian founder, was quick to see the potential. With an eye for extraordinary locations, it was his idea to build high on a hill, rather than down by the sea. And his vote of confidence paid off: Amanzo'e is on target to make a profit in its first year of operation.

It took two years, and more than €100m, to build the resort, but many more years were needed to acquire the land. The first plot was purchased in 2006, then 36 different landowners had to be persuaded to sell up. Now, 32 of these plots are destined to become fully serviced villas, also managed by Aman and designed by Tuttle. (Villas are only constructed once sold.) Greece's dire economic straits have not deterred buyers: seven plots have been bought, one villa is already complete and three more are under construction. And with prices starting at €3m for a two-bed property, they're not going at knockdown rates, unlike so many state-owned assets currently up for grabs.

Buyers, who include entrepreneurs and investment bankers from countries like Norway, Switzerland, the UK and

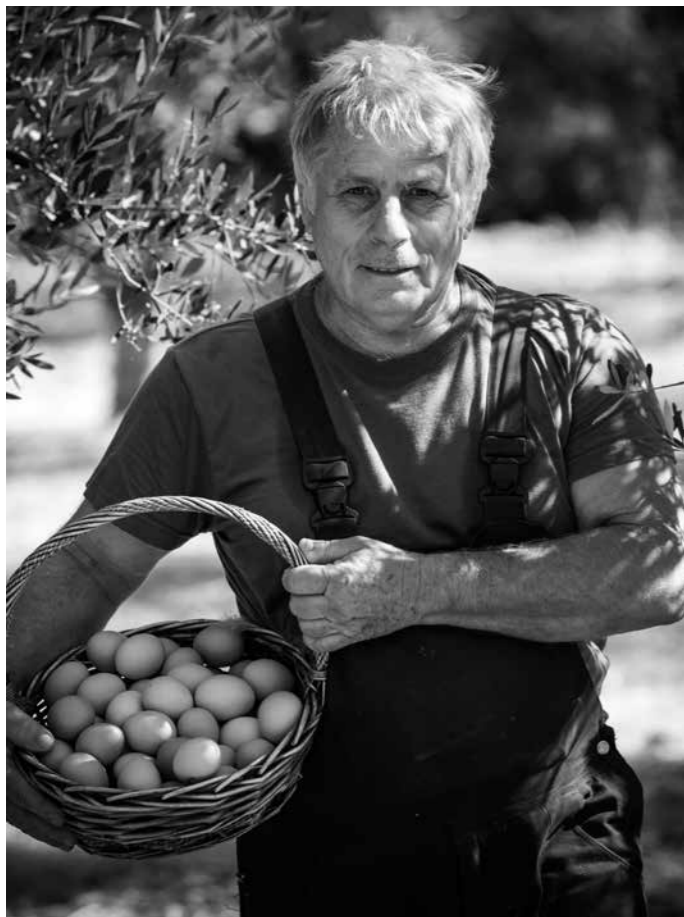
US, can opt to rent out their villas, and other benefits include maintenance and concierge services, a full-time housekeeper and cook, and exclusive access to the resort's three excellent restaurants, spa, beach club and two speedboats – a Wally One and a Pershing 62 – for island hopping. One villa owner who came to Amanzo'e for a long weekend and ended up buying a villa sums up the site's attraction: “Porto Heli and the surroundings are simply beautiful. It has the elegance of the French and Italian Riviera 50 years ago. Natural beauty, untouched surroundings, very friendly people, the healthy Greek cuisine, and over 300 sunny days per year. These are attributes that make it a safe investment, irrespective if there is an economic crisis or not.”

TAILOR-MADE

And then there's the thrill of working with a world-renowned architect. “Ed Tuttle cooperates with an excellent team on the ground, and we felt very safe that our particular requirements in respect to layout and design were addressed,” says the villa owner. “We are the type of person to tailor the design to our specific ▶

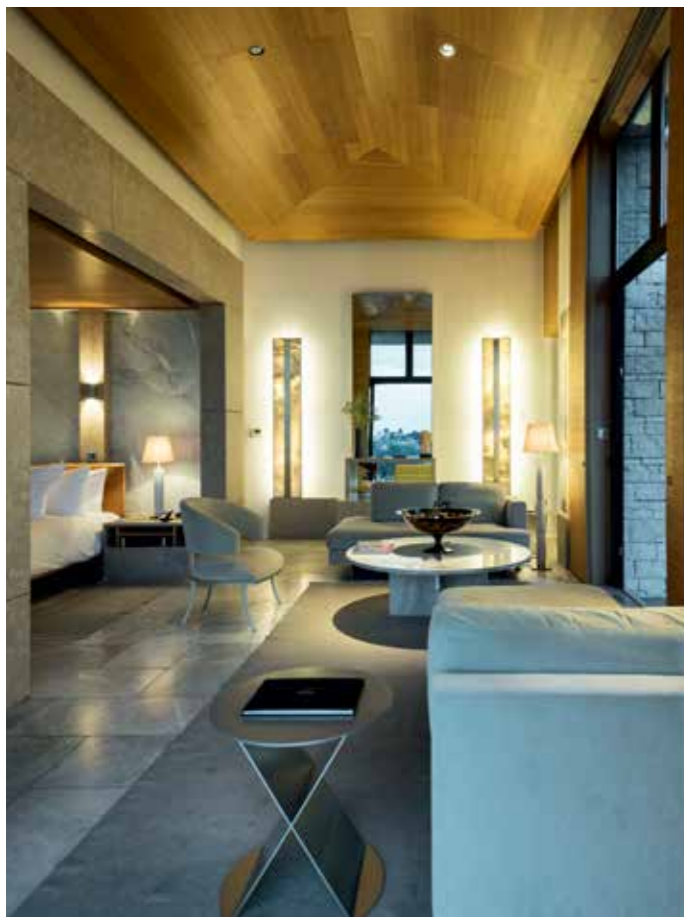
View from the air of Amanzo's beach club, left; drinks are served on the terrace, below





Above, left: Pascale Karathanassopoulos provides Amanzo'e with eggs from his nearby organic farm; above, right: one of the 350 olive tree in the hotel grounds; below, left: contemporary furnishing and neutral tones in a pavilion; below, right: Amanzo'e sources its thyme honey from the Bairhataris family

Above, left: Classic Greek civilisation can be explored at the Museum of Epidaurus; above, right: Stamatis Mizis, a fishmonger in Ermioni picks out fresh fish for the resort; below, left: the executive chef Dimitris Boutsalis; below, right: his take on a traditional dessert halva – roasted nuts, pear poached in hibiscus syrup and almond ice cream





Clockwise from above: poolside view at an Amanzo'e villa; Miltos Kambourides, co-founder of DCI, the investors behind the resort; the hotel's main restaurant, which features artwork by Kambourides' wife, Marina Vernicos; the helicopter, which can carry guests to Athens in just 20 minutes



“The Greek element takes centre stage in the architecture, construction materials, restaurants and landscaping. We didn't want to create a ‘ghetto’ for the rich, but actually integrate the community in our resort”

ideas and needs. Not everybody wants to allocate time to such a development process, but we love it.”

THAT LOCAL TOUCH

A modern-day Riviera is very much the ambition along the Peloponnese, a region steeped in history, culture and natural beauty that spans everything from virgin forests to ski resorts. More accessible than the Greek islands, where the season is limited to the summer months, Porto Heli's development is matched by a project of similar ambition in another corner of the peninsula: Costa Navarino in Messinia, which launched in 2011 with two Starwood-managed resorts and two golf courses. It's not quite the Côte d'Azur yet, but it is popping up on more jet-set itineraries than ever before.

Amanzo'e makes full use of its location: the majority of products used in the hotel come from local suppliers and everything possible is made in Greece. “The Greek element takes centre stage in the architecture, construction materials, restaurants and landscaping,” says Kambourides. “This was all very important to us, because we didn't want to create a ‘ghetto’ for the very rich, but actually integrate the community in our resort.” To that end, more than 90% of the 190 members of staff (five per room) are Greek, many from the surrounding area. All say they feel proud to be part of the Aman family.

Executive chef Dimitris Boutsalis, a native of nearby Sparta, is a committed locavore after a two-year stint at Noma. Boutsalis sources ingredients from a growing network of farmers and fishermen: he gets tiny red shrimp from

the pretty fishing village of Kilada, thyme honey from a bank manager-turned-beekeeper near Ermioni, and organic eggs and fresh noodles from Mr Pascale's chicken farm in the hamlet of Arki. “I came home after 20 years in New York with two bags of pills. Here, my life is simple, but I don't need pills,” says Pascal, as he proudly shows off his new chicken coop. “This is their Amanzo'e. Next year, I will build more suites for my birds, because chef wants more eggs.”

Kambourides sees a similarly bright future for the region. “Greece has incredible raw material, which is unique in the world,” he says. “It really makes me sad to see amazing resorts being created in artificial islands or places without cultural and natural advantages, while in Greece there is so little. My vision is to change that.” ◀

The Amanzo'e has 38 freestanding pavilions, with either valley or sea views. The bestselling rooms are the deluxe sea-view pavilions. All the pavilions are spacious and private, but families and large groups should opt for one of the fully serviced villas. Featuring 25m emerald marble pools and a private spa or gym, the opulent 4-6 bedroom villas all come with a dedicated housekeeper and two chefs who cater to guests' individual preferences. Pavilions start from €950 a night, up to €1,600 for deluxe sea view. To rent, villas start at €6,800 per night for a four-bed villa, €10,600 per night for a six-bed villa. To purchase: two-bedroom villas start at €3 million. amanresorts.com

Get a glimpse inside the Amanzo'e villas and the lockdown on Greek wine – go to CENTURION-MAGAZINE.COM

EAT AND DRINK

Tarsanas The best fish restaurant on Spetses, with tables on a romantic jetty in the old harbour. Fish soup and red mullet ceviche are stand-outs. (+30 22980 74490)

Zoggeria This simple seaside taverna on a pine-shaded bay has a short menu (moussaka, meatballs, chicken casserole) that's as divine as the setting.

Geitoniko On a balmy roof terrace set back from the hustle of Hydra's

harbour, Christina and Manolis deliver traditional Greek dishes with consistent quality and grace. (+30 22980 53615)

Marivon Rustic Greek charm meets French culinary finesse at this chic hideaway in the mountain village of Iliokastro. Perfect steak frites with béarnaise sauce and wood-baked bread. Open year-round. (+30 27540 91352)

Kavos Seafood straight off the

owner's fishing boat and tables dangling above the sea in Mandraki, a postcard-pretty port in Ermioni. (+30 27540 32152)

1969 Daglas It doesn't get more authentic than this local haunt in Kilada, a traditional fishing village. There's no menu – the owner, Takis, just brings out tray after tray of ever-changing mezze. (+30 69790 32930)

Leonidas This lively taverna in Ligourio is where all the stars

come out to play after performing at the ancient theatre of Epidauros nearby. A classic. (+30 27530 22115)

NTA The fancier sister restaurant of Tarsanas also specialises in seafood. Try the local speciality, “fish a la spetsiota” (catch of the day baked with tomatoes, onions and garlic) and less traditional dishes like octopus and olive carpaccio and squid ink spaghetti. (+30 22980 74009)